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## **In-Between Fatalism and Leverage: The Different Effects of Socioeconomic Variables on Students' Civic and Political Experiences and Literacy**

- This article explores the relationship between the socioeconomic status and the political participation of youngsters.
- A self-report questionnaire was administered to 732 Portuguese students.
- High cultural capital has a clear effect on political knowledge.
- Economic capital has a relevant effect on political participation experiences.
- Both forms of capital interact with the schooling context (public or private).

**Purpose:** This article explores the classical relationship between socioeconomic status and political domains, and the need to include different variables (contextual and individual) to measure the effect of economic and cultural capitals on youth participation and knowledge.

**Method:** A multivariate analysis of covariance was performed on a sample of 732 Portuguese students, from Grades 8 and 11, in order to analyse how different socioeconomic variables related to family and schooling contexts have an effect on their political knowledge and experiences.

**Findings:** The article highlights the differential role of socioeconomic variables on political knowledge and participatory patterns. Low economic capital instigates participation, while high cultural capital is related with higher political literacy. However, both forms of capital interact with the schooling context, revealing more complex patterns of behaviour and knowledge in students attending public and private schools.

### **Keywords:**

Young people, civic and political participation, political literacy, economic and cultural capital, public and private school

### **1 Introduction**

The topic of social inequality is crucial with regard to democracy's health. When socioeconomic conditions are very unevenly distributed across groups, the very notion of common well-being and the most basic forms of social

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bonds are put in jeopardy, as severe wealth gaps generate a decrease in social trust (Uslaner & Brown, 2005). An unequal distribution of resources and power entails different abilities of influencing political institutions (Cabral, 1997) and an unequal distribution of interests in the public sphere (van Deth, Montero, & Westholm, 2007). The groups that enjoy higher levels of economic and cultural capital are more likely to be acquainted with the most effective means to have their interests represented and to shape the social structure in ways that suit them better. Civic and political participation and the perception of the ability to make one's voice heard are, then, very much dependent on how well endowed with socioeconomic resources citizens are.

Inequalities in socioeconomic resources tend to be reproduced in civic and political participation (Badescu & Neller, 2007), even if the effects of this relationship are complex and multidimensional. People in the margins of society may feel particularly propelled to political involvement (Kornhauser, 2010) or, contrariwise, have their participation hindered due to the perception that society is too unequal and they do not fit the way the political system is organised (Uslaner & Brown, 2005). When studying youth civic and political participation, the school and the family are the most influential contexts: they are important socialising contexts and, at the same time, defining environments of socioeconomic status. The families' cultural capital is highly related to economic capital and the way specific groups take advantage of social institutions (Bourdieu, 2010 [1979]), also impacting significantly on students' academic results (Teddlie &



Reynolds, 2000) and on their progress in the educational system (Gorard, 2010). That is, cumulative disadvantages and the reproduction of inequalities are an increasingly serious matter, as social inequality continues to rise. Data from 'Inequality Watch', analysing the impact of austerity in several countries, highlight that in 2011 the disposable income of the richest 20% in Portugal was 5,8 times higher than the income of the poorest 20%<sup>1</sup>, and an OECD (2015) report shows that the unemployment rates have been increasing in the last years.

The economic and social crisis around the globe, and particularly in Europe, frames the context in which we collected the data presented in this paper. We will present a multivariate analysis of variance to understand whether and how socioeconomic variables (namely cultural capital, economic capital and type of school) are related to the political literacy and behaviour of 732 Portuguese students from the 8<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grades. In this manner, we seek to better understand how socioeconomic differentiation (measured with variables related to family and school contexts) operates regarding diverse experiences of participation (civic and political, collective and individual, online and offline) and political knowledge.

## 2 Socioeconomic status and participation: a debate that still matters

Socioeconomic inequalities are a classical, central topic in the social sciences (Weber, 1978; Marx, 1979; Durkheim, 1991; Bourdieu, 2010 [1979]; Giddens, 2013). They are regarded as a decisive organising feature of vast aspects of the life in our societies. Civic and political participation is one of those aspects. It comes as no surprise, then, that the link between civic and political participation and socioeconomic inequalities has also become a well-established research topic (e.g., Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995; Saeed, 2015; Carvalho, 2014; Caízlos & Voces, 2010; Nunes & Carmo, 2010; Nunes, 2013; Silva & Vieira, 2011; Rosenstone & Hansen, 2003; Schlozman, Verba, & Brady, 2012). This means that research on civic and political participation needs to consider the individual and socioeconomic conditions that promote or hinder it. The work of Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995) is particularly relevant here. They argue that different levels of resources, cognitive involvement and engagement in social networks have a major impact on the ability to influence political processes and institutions.

It is consensual in the literature that the distribution of power across society is largely determined by ownership of and access to a certain volume of resources (be they money, education or social connections), as socioeconomic and political inequalities feed each other (e.g., Lijphart, 1997; Verba et al., 1995; Bourdieu, 2010 [1979]; Uslaner & Brown, 2005). The concept of social class has typically been instrumental in accounting for these processes, as it is a potentially organised way to grasp the complexity and multidimensionality associated with the differential distribution of resources and power, according to different social positions (Bourdieu, 2010

[1979]). Authors such as Carvalho (2012), Caízlos and Voces (2010) and Cabral (2000) argue that social class is still a valid sociological tool to analyse phenomena such as participation. However, Pakulski and Waters' work, "The Death of Class" (1996), claims that in post-modern societies the linear and stable correspondence between the objective and subjective features of social classes is gone: identities and social practices are now defined based on specific life-styles and collectively shared values, rather than by one's location in the network of social relations of production. Individualization, globalization and reflexivity render the social organisation more fluid (Beck, 2007), and consequently social classes become less appropriate to understand inequality. The increasing relevance of post-materialistic values in politics (Inglehart, 1997) goes along with the argument about the heterogeneity of social groups and the decline of materialistic cleavages. Yet, in many countries, the Welfare State continues to fall short of reducing income gaps, and access to economic, social and cultural resources is still very unevenly distributed, preserving patterns of inequality based on the distance between classes (Nunes, 2013; Silva & Vieira, 2011). Portuguese research in this field shows that groups with greater resources at their disposal, mostly with higher levels of education, clearly stand out concerning political citizenship (Carvalho, 2012). Caízlos and Voces (2010) are quite straightforward in stressing the political relevance of class, considering that "in the field of political participation, class still matters. A significant and substantively meaningful association between class and political action can be observed in most European countries" (p. 407). An uneven distribution of capitals, is, then, very relevant in shaping participatory dispositions (Lamprianou, 2013).

## 3 The multidimensionality of socioeconomic status and its relation to youth participation

In research about youth civic and political participation, the variables used to measure socioeconomic status differ widely (Quintelier & Hooghe, 2013). Yet, there is a relative consensus that socioeconomic status is overall well defined by income, education and occupation (Schulz & Brese, 2008). Some authors choose one or two of these indicators as proxy variables for socio-economic status, such as the number of books at home alone (Lopes, Brenton & Cleaver, 2009) or parents' education and family income (Saeed, 2015). In the research field of civic and political participation, the variables most often used are income, education, occupational status and the number of books at home (Quintelier & Hooghe, 2013). Regarding education and income, studies show that the poorest and the less educated are those who are less likely to be politically active (Nie, Junn, & Stehlik-Barry, 1996; Verba et al., 1995; Van Deth & Elff, 2000; Quintelier & Hooghe, 2013; Dahl, 2006; Kay & Friesen, 2011). Along with the occupational status, these variables have a profound effect on the possibilities of individual choice and political behaviour (Adler, Boyce, Chesney, Cohen, Kahn, & Syme, 1994; Manza &

Brooks, 2008). Jacobs and Skopol (2005) clearly stressed the political and democratic impact of such disadvantage: "the voices of citizens with lower or moderate incomes are lost on the ears of inattentive public officials, while the advantaged roar with a clarity and consistency that policymakers readily hear and routinely follow" (p. 1).

The elements used by researchers to address socio-economic status are inextricably linked, often pointing to what has been named a "clustering of hardships" (Pacheco & Plutzer, 2008, p. 577): people with higher incomes are often more educated and vice-versa, and also have more books at home and probably belong to a network that shares high social capital (Verba et al., 1995; Wattenberg, 2007). As a result, they tend to display high levels of political knowledge and interest (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Nie et al., 1996). On the contrary, lower-socioeconomic status elicits beliefs of inability to influence politics: people feel they cannot take advantage of social opportunities nor have the skills to navigate the social institutions and networks that might potentially lead them to success (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2006). Krauss (2015) shows that perceptions of low-class rank are detrimental to both political efficacy and political behaviours such as signing petitions and being interested in the Government's activities. Socioeconomic status – the social, economic and cultural capitals associated to it – is transmitted from parents to children, as they share the same environment (e.g., Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Beck & Jennings, 1982). Thus, the educational level of the parents is highlighted by some authors as a powerful ingredient in understanding the puzzle of cumulative disadvantage in young people (Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Pacheco & Plutzer, 2008). Age is, then, another important individual dimension to take into account. Younger people, namely those with low levels of education, participate less than adults (Vecchione & Caprara, 2009; Stolle & Hooghe, 2009). Civic and political participation continues to be a sphere of adults, at least in the youngsters' point of view, who see themselves as being regarded as too immature to be fully involved in politics (Smith, et al., 2005); this relegated condition is further aggravated by their financial dependency from their parents (Arnett, 2000; Lister, 2007).

It is crucial to recognise that young people, far from being a homogeneous group, are in a situation in which cumulative differences (in contextual background, educational attainment, cultural and economic capital) may predict their political activities (Lamprianou, 2013). Some research suggests that more educated youths, with more economic resources, may replace conventional politics with new ways of engagement (Wray-Lake & Hart, 2012; Syvertsen, Wray-Lake, Flanagan, Osgood, & Briddell, 2011). On the other hand, Caínzos and Voces (2010) found that the new forms of civic and political engagement reveal deeper class differences than conventional political action, most notably voting. Nunes and Carmo (2010), explaining collective action in Europe, state that the overlap between different types of capital

(economic, social and cultural) has a clear effect on political behaviour. To be sure, different practices always require different resources, and this may help explaining political activity in a more reliable manner than psychological variables alone.

Such constructs are not independent of the classical sociological contributions on social inequality. Bourdieu (2010 [1979]) is perhaps one of the most influential sociological authors analysing the way different kinds of resources (capitals) contribute to distinctions between social groups. Economic capital can be directly converted into money, being related to family income and wealth. In its turn, cultural capital, namely its objectified and institutionalized state, is related to cultural goods (such as books) and academic credentials (levels of education) (*Ibid.*). In this article we follow this understanding that socioeconomic status is mainly related to financial and educational resources. We do not refer to social class once we do not have all the indicators necessary for that. Instead, we rest on the comprehensiveness of the concepts of cultural and economic capital to assess socioeconomic status. We adopt the concept of cultural capital because we include the parents' level of education, the number of books at home and the expected level of education - likewise what De Groot, Elchardus, Franck and Kavadias (2008) have done in assessing cultural capital as a standardized measure consisting of these three variables. The expectations on further education, although a subjective variable, have been proving consistent in explaining political participation (Quintelier & Hooghe, 2013); indeed, they are one of the most powerful predictors of civic knowledge in European countries, alongside home educational resources (Torney-Purta, 2002). Plus, we consider that this dimension adds flexibility to the concept of cultural capital – considering the critiques to Bourdieu's theory regarding its deterministic nature. Economic capital, which according to Bourdieu may facilitate the acquisition of cultural capital (2010 [1979]), is most often measured through family income and wealth (Schulz & Brese, 2008). However, it is likely that some youngsters lack knowledge about it, which would yield inconsistent data (Torney-Purta et al. 1999). Yet, their perception about financial difficulties in the family context may contribute to a reliable depiction of economic capital, once youngsters short on this type of resource will constrain their attitudes and behaviours. Finally, the type of school, potentially reflecting both forms of capital and, thus, youngsters' socioeconomic status, is considered an important variable to account for. Young people from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds have different access to the kinds of opportunities usually stimulated in settings such as schools (Flanagan & Levine, 2010). Such contexts represent opportunities to learn about civic issues, by discussing them with others, learning different perspectives, and constructing one's own political views (Flanagan & Levine, 2010).

#### 4 Highlighting the schooling context: private and public schools

The school is one of the most important youth socialization settings, and educational attainment impacts students' political knowledge and their civic and political participation. Education can drive the transformation or the reproduction of previous patterns of inequality (Junn, 2000). Its influence on political activity, however, is complex and may not be uniform regarding different political activities. One could argue that accounting for the type of school (public, free or private, fee-paying) in which the student is enrolled in is virtually equivalent to considering the student's socioeconomic status. Yet, this is not necessarily true. Families can try to compensate for their lack of economic and cultural capital by making an extra effort to have their children in a private school, whereas middle/high-status families often have their children in public schools. Still, it is important to take into consideration how the type of school contributes to civic and political participation, as different schools provide different opportunities. However, the type of school youngsters attend is often ignored in the literature that deals with the processes of civic and political involvement (Campbell, 2008; Macedo, 2000). Although the disadvantages related with family background are very important to understand youths' political involvement, such factors can be magnified by unequal opportunities at school, such as community voluntary service or students' assemblies (Flanagan & Levine, 2010).

Many authors would argue that looking at schools is crucial, as it may unveil whether students are learning values of universalism or individualism (Dreeben, 1968), which have a long-term influence on their stances towards public issues (Sikkink, 2013). Emanating from private groups, the curricula and the educational projects of private schools are not subject to the same constraints and uniformity as those imposed on public schools. Some argue that such schools may not be overwhelmingly concerned with taking into account the diversity that always characterizes any given community, thus raising questions about their commitment to democratic citizenship and public values (Gutmann, 1987; Macedo, 2000). On the other hand, there is research showing that students from secondary private schools score higher on political tolerance (Wolf, Greene, Kleitz, & Thalhammer, 2000) and participate more in volunteer services than their public counterparts (Greene, 1998). Likewise, Campbell (2000) found out that, despite differences in family background, private schools are as effective as public schools in conveying civic knowledge. In the same vein, Sikkink (2013) analyses the hidden civic lessons in public and private schools, concluding that private schools display organizational strengths (collective identity and normative climate) that effectively promote students' participation in public institutions. This is in line with previous research that had already pinpointed the hierarchical and bureaucratic traits that often characterise public schools, jeopardizing the creation of a collective identity (Brint, Contreras, & Matthews, 2001). Therefore, relational trust and civic-minded practices

seem to find ground to grow and develop in private schools (Sikkink, 2013). Such findings raise obvious concerns about students' experience of public schools, and call for further research in this field. It therefore appears crucial to include the different types of school, along with socioeconomic variables related to family, in analyses that seek to understand the civic and political participation patterns of youngsters.

In sum, then, our analytical framework, grounded on the classical theme of socioeconomic inequalities, explores the role of socioeconomic status – assessed here through the dimensions of cultural capital, economic capital and type of school - on political knowledge and political participation patterns of young people.

#### 5 The socioeconomic context and the educational system in Portugal

The data analysed in this paper were collected in 2013, during a context in which "Portugal is going through one of the worst economic crises in its long history as a sovereign state" (de Sousa, Magalhães & Amaral, 2014, p.1528). Massive demonstrations – in which young people had a leading role – took place in 2011 and 2012. They were clear signs of rebellion against the Government's political choices, and the austerity imposed by the Troika (composed by the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund) as result of the bailout, and the rises in unemployment, precariousness and social inequalities. Unemployment struck hardest the highly-educated young people and first-time job seekers (de Sousa et al., 2014); and many of those who managed to get a job earned "less than 750 euros per month - with scarce social protection, which contributes to a poverty risk rate of 20% amongst young people" (Estanque, Costa, Soeiro, 2013, p., 35). Increasingly more dependent on their families, young people were forced to leave the country looking for better opportunities, which lead to an emigration rate unparalleled since the 1960's (Docquier & Rapoport, 2011). This 'Desperate Generation' (*Geração à Rasca*) was the main protagonist of the biggest protest since the Carnation Revolution in 1974, which put an end to the dictatorial regime and established democracy (Baumgarten, 2013); this took place in March 2011 and was the first in a series of nationwide demonstrations. Portuguese movements took part in an international wave of protests, linking national-level claims (e.g. corruption, unemployment, tax increases) with the worldwide severe economic situation and European debates about the financial crisis and the dependency of European states regarding international financial markets. In September 2012, the motto "Fuck Troika, we want our lives back" was launched in the social networks, and lead one million people to the streets in several cities throughout the country, protesting against the worsening of life conditions following more than one year of austerity. Our data collection took place in the aftermath of these large protests in Portugal, which were framed by the "global protest" wave in which

online platforms, particularly social networks, played a central role (Estanque, Costa & Soeiro, 2013).

The economic crisis and the reduction in the public financing, including in education led to questioning the very role of the school as a mechanism of social equality and mobility. Education in Portugal is free and compulsory until the 12<sup>th</sup> grade, which is when students complete the secondary education. The Portuguese educational system is divided into four sequential levels: pre-primary education (optional for children from 3- to 6-year-olds), basic education with three sequential cycles, secondary education with a three-year cycle, and finally higher education. Basic education includes: the first cycle, which comprises 4 years (6- to 10-year-olds), corresponding to primary education; the second cycle encompasses 2 years (10- to 12-year-olds), corresponding to 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grades; and the third cycle has 3 years (12- to 15-year-olds), corresponding to 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grades. Secondary education, for 15- to 18-year-olds, takes three years and includes four types of courses: scientific-humanistic, technological, specialist artistic and vocational. Concerning private education, the country's development led to the creation of publicly-subsidized private schools in order to compensate for the lack of schools in some regions (Rosado, 2012). Private and cooperative institutions that are part of the education system comply with the same legislation as State education regarding teaching standards, curriculum, assessment and teachers' qualifications. The private schools in our sample are not encompassed by such contracts with the State, but instead are fully private. In 2015 there were 1498 private schools, of which 1120 offered basic education and 378 secondary education. Regarding public education, there were 6499 institutions with basic education (total number = 5915) and secondary education ( $n = 584$ ). Private schools, contrary to public schools, require to the payment of fees. Moreover, private schools are free to select their teachers, contrary to public schools, in which teachers are allocated by the Ministry of Education following a nationwide competition. Research comparing both type of schools in Portugal – public (free) and private (paid) – indicates a positive impact of private schools on 9<sup>th</sup> grade students' performance, as private management schemes target successful results in exams and increase the likelihood of finishing mandatory schooling in a shorter period of time (Rosado, 2012). Nata, Pereira and Neves (2014), analysing the Portuguese secondary school rankings, compare the differential between the internal scores and the scores obtained in national exams by students of private and public schools. They show that private schools consistently show higher differential, thereby proving that inequalities in accessing higher education are reinforced through procedural unfairness (that is, grade inflation).

## 6 Method

In order to understand youth involvement, we seek to analyse how different socioeconomic variables that inter-

sect family and schooling contexts relate with political knowledge and experiences.

Our chief question is: How do cultural and economic capitals – socioeconomic variables associated with different youth contexts (family and school) – relate with political literacy and patterns of civic and political participation? First, through cluster analysis, we looked at how the youngsters in our sample organised around cultural variables (parents' levels of education, educational expectations and books at home). We consider that this procedure adds consistency to the cultural capital variable, since it congregates not only the cultural capital that one holds, but also his/her cultural expectations. Then, we performed a multivariate analysis of covariance in order to explore whether and how cultural capital (held and expected), economic capital and the type of school (often and indicator of both cultural and economic capital) are related to political literacy and civic and political participation (online participation and demonstrations; and civic and lifestyle politics). Gender (female and male) and school year were introduced as covariates – as previous analyses had shown their effect on participation and literacy and we intended to control it – and the socioeconomic variables as differentiating factors<sup>2</sup>. The IBM SPSS Statistics 22 software was used for data analysis.

### 6.1 Participants and data collection

Participants were asked to fill in the questionnaire during classes, in the researchers' presence. Schools (public and private) and students (from the 8<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grades) were sampled based on convenience. We tried to ensure two criteria: a) diversity regarding the nature and development of geographical areas (urban and semi-rural); b) gender balance. The need for conjugating these criteria proved difficult, mostly due to the fact that in semi-rural areas there are very few independent, fee-paying private schools (indeed, private schools in semi-rural areas tend to be Government-dependent, publicly-subsidized).

Eleven schools located in the north and centre of Portugal (in the districts of Porto, Braga, Viseu and Coimbra) were included in the sample. A total of 732 Portuguese students (53.8 % female) from Grades 8 (47.7%,  $n = 349$ ) and 11 (52.3%,  $n = 383$ ) participated in the study<sup>3</sup>. Students from public schools:  $N = 358$ ; students from private schools:  $N = 374$ . Gender distribution is balanced in the Grade 8 subsample (Female = 173; Male = 176), and less so in Grade 11, with more than half of the sample (57.5%) being females (Female = 221; Male = 162). We obtained parental approval from all participants. The average time needed for filling out the questionnaire was approximately 40 min.

The instrument is a self-report questionnaire that comprises a wide set of scales related with political and schooling dimensions. In this paper we will focus on the indicators of socioeconomic status, civic and political experiences and political literacy. Although we mobilised several dimensions already used and tested in previous studies with similar samples, the final version of the instrument was improved by the youngsters themselves,

through the think aloud method: we gathered small groups of youngsters and asked them to talk aloud while filling in the questionnaire, encouraging them to think about the best ways to improve the intelligibility of the items<sup>4</sup>.

## 6.2. Measures

### 6.2.1 Political literacy and participation

*Political literacy*, an important predictor of civic and political participation (Amadeo, Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Husfeldt, & Nikolova, 2002), is a competence potentially developed in socialising contexts such as the family and the school. To measure this dimension we adopted a set of questions previously used in an international study on Civic Education (Torney-Purta, Schwille, & Amadeo, 1999), in which Portugal was one of the participating countries (Menezes, 2002). Our instrument included four items of political literacy that were both easily intelligible and diverse, in order to be adequate for both 8<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grades. Thus, in the four items, we asked the respondents 1) to interpret a political party's pamphlet; 2) to identify the nature of a democratic system, in opposition to a dictatorial one; 3) to identify the function of political parties in democracy; and 4) to identify processes of political corruption. Items were coded as wrong or right answers (0 = wrong answer; 1 = right answer), and were then aggregated into a final variable that gives the overall level of political literacy (1= one question right; 2 = two questions right; 3= three questions right; 4 = four questions right).

Experiences of civic and political participation during the last 12 months were explored through the adaptation of the Portuguese version of the Political Action Scale (Lyons, 2008; Menezes, Ribeiro, Fernandes-Jesus, Malafaia, & Ferreira, 2012), measuring a wide range of civic and political behaviours, including direct forms of participation, online participation and civic engagement. The youngsters rated the question "Have I done the following activities during the last 12 months?" from 1 (Never) to 5 (Very often). In this paper, experiences of civic and political participation are a two dimensional construct that results from the exploratory factor analysis: *Online participation and demonstrations* with three items (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .61$ ): "attend a public meeting or demonstration dealing with political or social issues"; "link news, music or videos with a social or political content to my contacts"; "sign an online petition". *Civic and lifestyle politics* with three items (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .56$ ): "do volunteer work"; "wear a bracelet, sign or other symbol to show support for a social or political cause"; "boycott or buy certain products for political, ethical or environmental reasons". The first scale entails participation in demonstrations and in the internet, which are often quite intertwined, with the latter serving as a platform for real-world involvement (Castells, 2012); the second scale comprises activities combining a typically desirable kind of civic involvement – volunteering – (Serek, Petrovicová, & Macek, 2015) and the politicisation of individual choices that commonly belong to the private sphere – wearing symbols for political

reasons or practicing political consumerism (Giddens, 1991).

### 6.2.2. Socioeconomic status

*Economic capital* is measured through the perception of financial difficulties at home. The effect of family income on political participation is widely reported, and here it is incorporated as a measure of socio-economic status (Verba et al., 1995). As it is likely that young people do not know their parents' income (Torney-Purta et al., 1999), we ask about their perception about the existence of financial problems at home (1 = never; 2 = sometimes; 3 = often).

To assess *cultural capital (held and expected)*, we created a variable that combines the parents' level of education, the number of books at home and the expected level of school attainment. We asked youngsters about the educational level of both mother and father, in a scale ranging from 1 (never attended school) to 5 (attended or finished higher education). We also included the number of books at home, since it is used as an indicator of educational level and social and economic background (Woessmann, 2005). Plus, this variable often works as a double-check of the parents' level of education, as youngsters may not know it but may estimate how many books exist at home (Torney-Purta et al., 1999; Quintelier & Hooghe, 2013). The scale response has six levels (1 = None; 2 = 1-10 books; 3 = 11-50 books; 4 = 51-100 books; 5 = 101-200 books; 6 = more than 200). Finally, we considered the expected level of school attainment (1 = Basic education; 2 = Secondary education; 3 = Vocational course; 4 = Bachelor; 4 = Master degree; 5 = PhD) as an indicator of success in formal education, which is related to political knowledge and interest (Nie et al., 1996; Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980). In order to create a variable combining these three dimensions, related with the family's cultural resources and educational expectations, in order to elaborate a more comprehensive cultural capital variable, we performed a clustering analysis, combining hierarchical clustering and k-means clustering, to classify the participants according to their cultural capital (held and expected). The four clusters solution explains about 41% variance for both the 8<sup>th</sup> and the 11<sup>th</sup> grades. The final variable has four groups:

1) Low Cultural Capital [N = 100]: youngsters' mothers attended or completed secondary (35%), basic education (34%), primary education (19%), and higher education (10%); the majority of fathers' levels of education are basic (39%) and primary education (28%), with 25% having attended or completed secondary education; 55% of these youngsters expect to achieve the secondary level of education (and 36% expect to achieve a vocational training course); 35% of respondents have between 1 and 10 books at home, 23% have between 11 and 50 and 18% between 51-100.

2) Medium-Low Cultural Capital [N = 135]: the most frequently reported mother's levels of education (attended or concluded) are basic education (40 %), followed by secondary education (36%) and primary education

(17%); the same trend applies to father's level of education (primary education: 21%; basic education: 40%; secondary education: 33%); most youngsters intend to achieve the PhD level (34%), the master degree (33%) or the graduation degree (33.3%); and report having between 1 and 10 books at home (51%) or between 11 and 50 (49%).

3) Medium-High Cultural Capital [N = 67]: the mother's most frequent level of education (attained or concluded) is basic education (42%), followed by secondary education (31%) and primary education (21%); most youngsters' fathers attended or completed basic education (54%) or primary school (27%); the majority of these youngsters expect to achieve a PhD (55%), followed by the master degree (31.3%); and they have between 51 and 100 books at home (46%) or between 101 and 200 (31%).

4) High Cultural Capital [N = 430]: most of these young people's mothers have attended or completed higher education (81%), followed by secondary education (15.3%); 67% of their fathers attended or concluded higher education, followed by secondary education (28.4%); 49% of these youngsters expect to achieve a PhD level, followed by 31% who expect to obtain a master degree (31%); 47% of these youngsters have more than 200 books at home and 21% between 101-200.

Additionally, the *type of school* (1 = public; 2 = private) is considered in this paper, once it may be an indicator of family's socioeconomic status.

## 7 Results

Multivariate tests reveal significant effects of cultural capital [Pillai's Trace = .046, F(9,1980) = 3.402,  $p = .000$ ], economic capital [Pillai's Trace = .043, F(6,1318) = 4.881,  $p = .000$ ] and type of school [Pillai's Trace = .015, F(3,658) = 3.237,  $p = .022$ ]. The tests of between-subjects effects showed that cultural capital and the type of school have significant effects on political literacy ( $p = .000$ ;  $p = .010$ , respectively), but not on participation experiences. In its turn, economic capital has a significant effect in both dimensions of civic and political participation, "online participation and demonstrations" ( $p = .000$ ) and "civic and lifestyle politics" ( $p = .006$ ).

Additionally, there are also significant interaction effects between cultural capital and the type of school [Pillai's Trace = .045, F(9,1980) = 3.318,  $p = .000$ ], and also between the type of school and economic capital [Pillai's Trace = .032, F(6,1318) = 3.552,  $p = .002$ ] in political literacy ( $p = .001$ ,  $p = .010$ ) and in online participation and demonstrations ( $p = .006$ ,  $p = .010$ ).

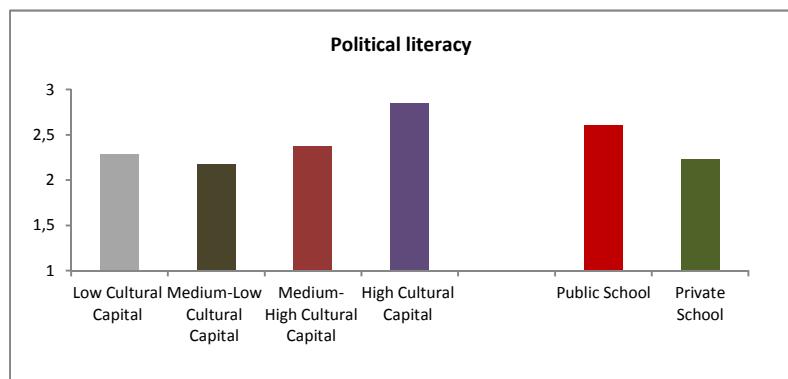
### 7.1 The role of socioeconomic variables on political literacy

Regarding cultural capital (held and expected), pairwise comparisons show statistically significant differences in political literacy between the high cultural capital group and the groups with low ( $p = .003$ ) and medium-low

cultural capital ( $p = .000$ ), with political literacy being higher in the group with high cultural capital (higher educated parents, more than 200 books at home and school expectations at the PhD level) as shown in Figure 1.

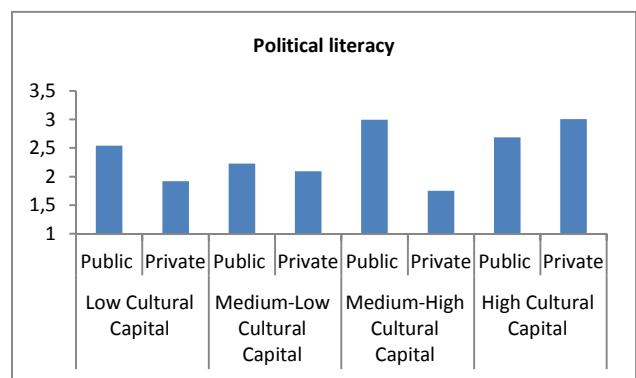
Studying in a public or private school also has a significant effect in political literacy: students of public schools score higher on literacy (Fig. 1).

Figure 1: Political literacy – effects of cultural capital and type of school



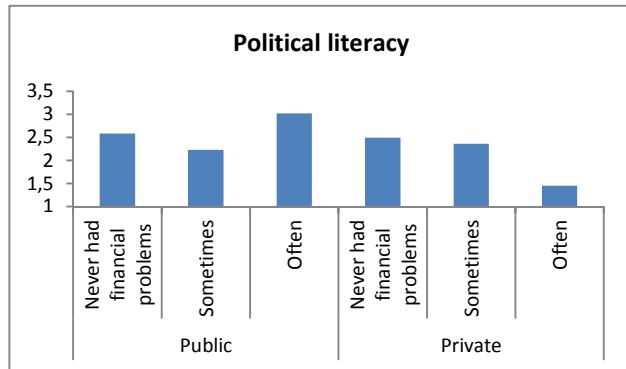
Furthermore, the results suggest that the types of school students are enrolled in present variations concerning political literacy according to cultural capital patterns: overall political literacy is higher in public schools, with the exception of students with the highest cultural capital – see Fig. 2.

Figure 2: Political literacy – interaction effects between cultural capital and type of school



Students from public and private schools also present different levels of political literacy according to their economic capital: for students from public schools, the increase in financial problems at home is related with higher levels of political literacy, while in private schools the more often students perceive the existence of financial problems, the lower their political literacy (Fig. 3).

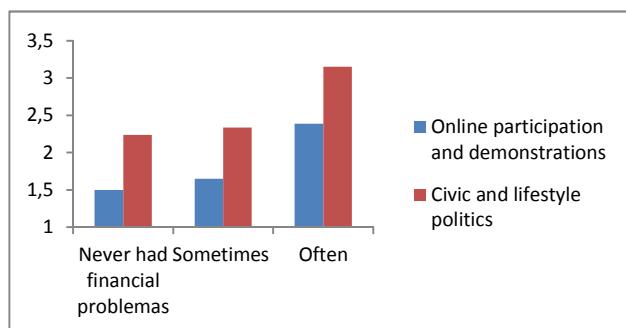
Figure 3: Political literacy – interaction effects between type of school and financial problems



## 7.2 The role of socioeconomic variables on civic and political participation

Economic capital is significantly related with both participatory dimensions, in the same way: the level of participation in the online sphere and in demonstrations increases with the existence of financial problems at home. The same happens regarding volunteering and lifestyle politics. The score on both dimensions stands out when students report feeling “often” the existence of financial problems at home.

Figure 4: Civic and political participation – effect of financial problems



Furthermore, regarding online participation and the involvement in demonstrations, there are interaction effects between cultural capital and type of school, and between economic capital and the type of school. Oddly, the students with high cultural capital and with low cultural capital from public schools report more experiences of e-participation and involvement in protests, while students in the intermediate levels of cultural capital (medium-low and medium-high) belonging to private schools show a higher engagement in those forms of participation (Fig. 5). Furthermore, participation through online platforms and in demonstrations appears to be induced by students’ lack of economic capital – as portrayed in Figure 4 –, with higher levels of participation when feeling “often” the existence of financial problems at home (particularly for private-school students) (Fig. 6).

Figure 5: Online participation and demonstrations – interaction effects between cultural capital and type of school

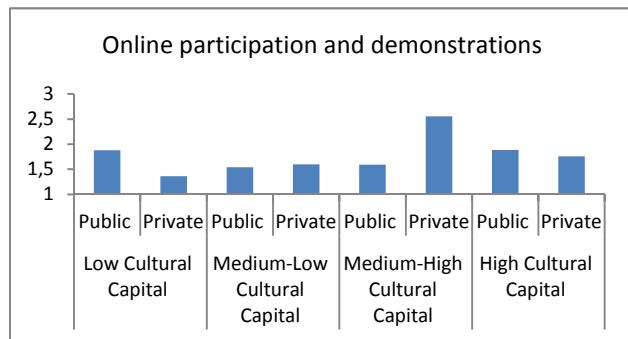
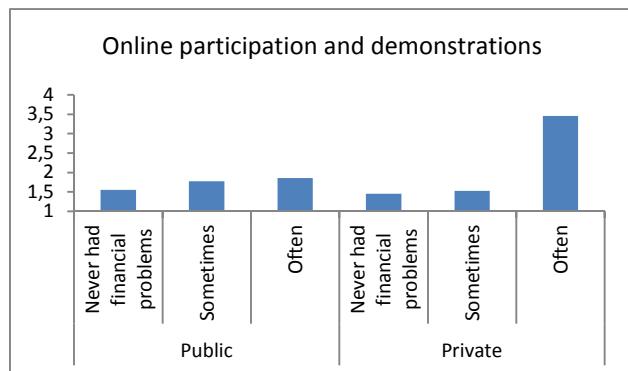


Figure 6: Online participation and demonstrations – interaction effects between type of school and financial problems



## 8 Discussion and final remarks

The results show that high cultural capital has a clear effect on political knowledge. Having highly educated parents, a wide access to information and good expectations about one’s own educational progress improves the likelihood of being well-informed about political systems and the role political parties should have in a democracy, as well as the ability to interpret a political leaflet and understanding what corruption is. This result is not unexpected, considering the fact that possessing a high cultural capital typically distinguishes those who are closer to legitimised culture from those who are further away from it (Bourdieu, 2010 [1979]). However, and regarding the type of school youngsters attend, public-school students exhibit more political literacy than their private-school counterparts. Nevertheless, the interaction effect between the type of school and cultural capital shows that this pattern of differences – political literacy scores being higher for public school students and for those with higher cultural capital – does not emerge for students who belong to a cultural elite (high cultural capital), but it clearly does for those students who have medium-high cultural capital (whose parents do not have high educational levels, but nonetheless display high expectations regarding their future educational attainment and have a relatively high number of books at home). Thus, access to political knowledge and literacy is not something necessarily linked to private schooling contexts, nor exclusive to some sort of cultural elite. In fact, a self-selection effect may be at stake here.

In other words, public schools are related to higher political literacy, except regarding youngsters who already belong to a family environment characterised by a high level of cultural resources and more access to political information. The contact with plurality (different opinions and living conditions), and probably the stronger conveyance of universalist values (Dreeben, 1968) that characterises public school environments may be fostering more knowledge about democracy and the political world. In its turn, economic capital emerged as an important variable regarding experiences of civic and political participation. The students who report having financial problems at home more often participate in the online and offline realms, both through protests and individualized forms of activism. This result seems to confirm, then, that subjective perceptions of deprivation and hardship are important in mobilising for political action (Klandermans, 1997). Concerning specifically online participation and the involvement in demonstrations – currently very close spheres of participation, especially considering the socio-political moment in which we collected the data, described in section four – the lack of economic capital increases the likelihood of getting involved in this kind of participatory pattern, most notably regarding private-school students. A tentative explanation for this may be that the impact of the economic crisis is felt more intensely, at least in subjective terms, by those who were previously immune to this kind of problems. Thus, they may feel more prompted for action.

As seen in Figure 3, the levels of political literacy are very similar for students who have high economic capital, whether they are in public or in private schools. The situation is completely different with respect to students with low economic capital, with students from public schools having much higher levels of political literacy than those from private schools. While this may appear contradictory with the fact that private-school students who more frequently perceived financial problems are more prompt for action, this may be explained by the specific context in which the data were collected. Indeed, the data gathered may refer to a short and specific time frame, in which promptness for action was not determined by a stable socioeconomic situation (including stable knowledge about the situation), but rather by sudden changes that had an impact on emotions and attitudes and promoted extreme behaviours. Although private institutions are known for being very effective in leading youngsters towards a successful educational pathway (Rosado, 2012; Nata et al., 2014), they seem less successful in terms of political education, probably avoiding an explicit politicisation of the school context.

E-participation and involvement in demonstrations seems to be the participatory pattern more significantly influenced by a complex relationship between economic and cultural capital, considering the type of schools. As discussed above, students in this cluster do not have highly-educated parents and therefore are not related to typical upper class families, but nonetheless display very high educational expectations and have a significant

number of books at home. Youngsters in this cluster who study in private schools probably do so due to an extra financial effort from their parents. Therefore, and again taking into consideration the social context, the socio-political circumstances may have pushed them to engage in online discussions about the political situation and to participate in the anti-austerity demonstrations that occurred in this period as they may have felt that their high expectations were being put at risk. Another way of looking at these results, and considering that these kind of counter-intuitive effects are specifically related to the pattern of online participation and demonstrations, is that the extraordinary high levels of civic and political engagement at the time may have blurred the traditional cultural and economic capital boundaries, bringing diversity to the streets and the online forums.

Overall, the results indicate that, on the one hand, socioeconomic status continues to be a useful device in analysing knowledge and behaviours –with political literacy being related to high levels of cultural capital; on the other hand, however, youth groups, particularly taking into consideration their schooling context, are far from homogeneous. Considering the type of school (private or public) is useful, mostly to complexify more or less established ideas such as the one that students from private schools present higher levels of political literacy than public-school students. Our results indicate the opposite: public-school students exhibit higher levels of political literacy, also when they feel financial difficulties. Moreover, regarding cultural capital, the results show that the parents' education level is not necessarily a source of cumulative disadvantage for some youngsters, as they, despite that fact, aspire to attain high academic titles, display good political knowledge and engage in civic and political forms of participation. Finally, and regarding economic capital, the results go in line with both the classical and the recent literature on collective behaviour which suggests that contexts of crisis and socioeconomic hardship trigger protests (e.g., Marx & Engels, 1992 [1848]; Kornhauser, 2010), particularly from groups whose position is threatened and risk serious losses (Buechler, 2004).

In sum, these results suggest two final observations. Socioeconomic status is very relevant in studying political literacy and participatory experiences, as it shapes some of the expectable patterns that emerge from the data. Yet, it is the contexts (space and time – the schooling context and the moment of data collection) in which different capitals interact that render both expectable and unexpected patterns more understandable. In other words, socioeconomic variables play an influential role in political knowledge and behaviours – whether towards a 'fatalist' condition (political literacy being related with high levels of cultural capital) or some sort of 'leverage' (lack of economic capital) being related with higher levels of political participation). That is, the type of school and the specific moment (social, political and economic) that frames youngsters' lives and experiences are fundamental in making sense of the influence that socioeconomic capitals exert in political literacy and

participation, adding complexity to what could be regarded as simply fatalism or leverage.

This article challenges the literature indicating that public schools' bureaucracy and lack of resources may provide less room for the development of civic and political competences – our results prove otherwise in what regards political literacy. Further studies could focus this particular dimension, looking into the curriculum specificities of both types of schools and the activities they promote in relation to students' knowledge and behaviours. Additionally, our results contribute to a deeper understanding of the effect of cultural and economic capital in relation to the schooling context, showing that in a particularly hard (and therefore, politically effervescent) socioeconomic context, the lack of economic capital propels political involvement overall, also possibly changing previous patterns of civic and political participation and literacy.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> [www.inequalitywatch.eu/spip.php?article192&id\\_mot=80&lang=fr](http://www.inequalitywatch.eu/spip.php?article192&id_mot=80&lang=fr)

<sup>2</sup> The effects of school year were not directly taken into account in this analysis, given that previous exploratory analyses showed that both 8th and 11th grades presented a similar distribution regarding cultural and economic capital variables.

<sup>3</sup> Eighth grade students have been included in the sample because this is a relevant age period concerning political development (Amadeo, Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Husfeldt, & Nikolova, 2002). Like 11<sup>th</sup> grade students, they have the right to participate in political events. Actually, we have data – not analysed in this article – showing that some of the 8<sup>th</sup> grade youngsters took part in demonstrations, both along their peers (in students' demonstrations) and their families (in anti-austerity demonstrations).

<sup>4</sup> During the think aloud method, 11 youngsters (aged between 14 and 23 years old) gave important suggestions, mainly regarding the clarity of the instructions and the items of the questionnaire. Based on their comments we introduced several changes concerning the standardisation of responses' scales and the way some questions were formulated, mainly in order to avoid ambiguous interpretations by the respondents. Specifically regarding the four items of political literacy, the changes were mostly rewording in order to make the discourse simpler.